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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## The Digital Natives Are Here And Your School is Obsolete

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Early adopters of instructional technologies, for years, have been trying to raise awareness of the need for theological education to be adaptive (never mind innovative--that just seems not in



the DNA of most theological schools) to the emerging realities of learning in higher education. Many have been warning that "the Digital Natives are coming!"

Well, the Digital Natives are here, and as a result, most theological schools are obsolete; they just don't know it. That is, the way most theological schools teach is obsolete. Students have changed, and as a result, so has the nature of education and learning.

Here are some characteristics of the incoming students in seminaries (adapted from Beloit Colleges "Mindset" lists):

- They are the sharing generation, having shown tendencies to share everything, including

- possessions, no matter how personal.
- Having a chat has seldom involved talking.
  - Their TV screens keep getting smaller as their parents' screens grow ever larger.
  - Rites of passage have more to do with having their own cell phone and Skype accounts than with getting a driver's license and car.
  - A tablet is no longer something you take in the morning.
  - Threatening to shut down the government during Federal budget negotiations has always been an anticipated tactic.
  - Growing up with the family dog, one of them has worn an electronic collar, while the other has toted an electronic lifeline.
  - Plasma has never been just a bodily fluid.
  - With GPS, they have never needed directions to get someplace, just an address.
  - There has never been a national maximum speed on U.S. highways.
  - Their favorite feature films have always been largely, if not totally, computer generated.
  - They have never really needed to go to their friend's house so they could study together.
  - They may have been introduced to video games with a new Sony PlayStation left in their cribs by their moms.
  - A Wiki has always been a cooperative web application rather than a shuttle bus in Hawaii.
  - They have always been able to plug into USB ports
  - Their parents' car CD player is soooooo ancient and embarrassing.
  - Since they binge-watch their favorite TV shows, they might like to binge-watch the video portions of their courses too.
  - "Press pound" on the phone is now translated as "hit hashtag."
  - The water cooler is no longer the workplace social center; it's the place to fill your water bottle.
  - There has always been "TV" designed to be watched exclusively on the web.
  - Yet another blessing of digital technology: They have never had to hide their dirty magazines under the bed.
  - Attending schools outside their neighborhoods, they gather with friends on Skype, not in their local park.
  - They have never used Netscape as their web browser.
  - "Good feedback" means getting 30 likes on your last Facebook post in a single afternoon.
  - They are the first generation for whom a "phone" has been primarily a video game, direction finder, electronic telegraph, and research library.
  - Electronic signatures have always been as legally binding as the pen-on-paper kind.
  - They have largely grown up in a floppy-less world.
  - XM has always offered radio programming for a fee.
  - There have always been emojis to cheer us up.
  - Donald Trump has always been a political figure, as a Democrat, an Independent, and a Republican.
  - Amazon has always invited consumers to follow the arrow from A to Z.
  - In their lifetimes, *Blackberry* has gone from being a wild fruit to being a communications device to becoming a wild fruit again.

- They may choose to submit a *listicle* in lieu of an admissions essay.
- By the time they entered school, laptops were outselling desktops.
- Once on campus, they will find that college syllabi, replete with policies about disability, non-discrimination, and learning goals, might be longer than some of their reading assignments.
- Whatever the subject, there's always been a blog or a Youtube channel for it.
- A movie scene longer than two minutes has always seemed like an eternity.
- As toddlers, they may have taught their grandparents how to Skype.
- Wikipedia has steadily gained acceptance by their teachers.(1)

Closer to home: The majority of your incoming students have taken at least one online course, in elementary school, high school or college; they don't need a "tutorial" or orientation to using an LMS (but many of your Faculty do!). A paper syllabus is useless to them. They expect that most of the information they need for your class will be on a digital platform (an LMS, a website, or an app) on a screen (a laptop, a tablet, or their phones). Whatever they produce in your class, for whatever subject, will be digital to some extent. And, they are better at Powerpoint than you.

The reality is that as theological schools we hold on to an industrial-aged model in a digital world. Furthermore, the imagined future students we push our admissions office to find to fill our classroom seats and residential halls don't need us to learn. Classroom instruction as a signature pedagogy is obsolete.

That may seem an overstatement, but here are examples of how Digital Natives challenge ideas of how you learn and from whom.

At 13 Patrick McCabe learned robotics from the internet. He even demonstrates how to teach a robot to learn.

Amira Willighagen was seven years old she took it upon herself to learn how to sing opera music.

Growing up in Pakistan, there were no instructors in town that could teach Usman Riaz how to play percussive guitar, so he learned it from the internet. "I wanted to learn more about that so I just let the internet be my teacher," Usman said, "You learn from exposure and you learn from watching other people and that's exactly what I did except that instead of having the person physically in front of me I had a portal to them through the computer." He says, "There's so much out there available for everybody that they don't need to sit and worry about whether they don't have a teacher or not, you just need an internet connection and the desire to want to learn something and that's really it."

Arguably, the most important role of a dean is to be the visionary that shapes the educational values and enterprise of the school. Does your vision for your school align with the realities of a digital world?

Is your Faculty teaching in the ways Digital Natives need to learn? Expect to be taught?  
Is your Faculty preparing ministers with skills for a world that no longer exists?  
Is your Faculty as attentive to the ways of teaching and learning as much as they are to *what* they teach? Will your next incoming class find they've signed on to an industrial age system of education that is obsolete?  
Where is your school situated in the landscape of online theological education?

(1) Adapted from Beloit College's "Mindset" lists.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/01/digital-natives-school-obsolete/>